

1 May 2016

**Drooping Hands, Wobbly Knees**  
Hebrews 12:1-13

Like Jesus, the author of Hebrews thinks of God as Father, but he stresses a particular aspect of parental love: discipline. We read Hebrews 12, verses 1-13:

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*

*Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children —*

*‘My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,  
or lose heart when you are punished by him;  
for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves,  
and chastises every child whom he accepts.’*

*Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.*

We’ve been doing some theological heavy lifting lately as we’ve worked through the New Testament book of Hebrews, which – along with Paul’s letter to the Romans – is really the only example of theological writing in the Bible. The rest is story, poetry, song, encouragement, and practical instruction and advice, and while you can draw theological conclusions from all that, it is not theology itself. Hebrews, though, is theology, and it’s hard stuff. It’s difficult even to read, let alone comprehend. I’ve almost felt guilty sending the scriptures to our Lay Readers each week – assigning them these long, convoluted, \$40-gilt-edged sentences to try to make sense of. Some people, like C.S. Lewis, are able to make complex ideas clear and accessible. Other people, like the author of Hebrews, are not C.S. Lewis.

But as we close this series, we should note that at least the author doesn’t fall into the fatal trap of writing theology that’s all abstract ideas without practical application. Our author never goes more than a couple of chapters without pausing to say, “Now this is what all this means for the way we live our lives.” He had to be practical. From chapter ten, we can see that

he was writing to a group of people who were facing regular persecution. None of them had been killed yet for being a Christian, but all had faced ridicule, rejection, and some had had their property confiscated by the authorities. He was writing to people for whom their faith had very clear real-life consequences, and they didn't need a conceptual theology. They needed one that dealt with their physical reality. How should a Christian *live*.

Before we look at what Hebrews says about that, though, what do *we* say? What does our theology teach us about how to live our lives? To put it another way, in our American Christianity what does it mean to "live a Christian life"? In general terms, we can isolate three different answers to that question. First is the one I would call the "Personal Morality" approach: be good people, especially regarding sex. Be honest and hardworking and above all don't break any sexual taboos. This "personal morality" approach is most often found in evangelical churches. Some churches, though not all, take the next step and say that if you do all that, God will reward you. You can have your best life now! But being personally moral is one answer to the question, "what is a good Christian life." A second answer is the one I would call the "Faithful Churchmember" approach. Go to church regularly, serve in the church, give money to the church. And when the budget's tight, give a little more money to the church. Maybe you've heard this before. We Methodists do it a lot. I heard recently about a study in which someone went to a different Methodist church every Sunday for a year and then summarized the gospel as proclaimed among United Methodists. Here it is: "You need to try harder to do more for the church." Yay. Good news. A third understanding of the Christian life, also found among Methodists, along with other Mainline congregations, is the "Social Justice" definition. To this group, the good Christian life is all about getting involved in society and working to change unjust structures and practices: racism, sexism, inequality of all kinds, oppression of the weak, abuse of the environment, and so on.

So there are three answers: personal morality, faithfulness to the church, and social justice. Now, actually all of these have good points. We *should* be individually moral and strive for integrity and purity in our personal lives. We *should* support the church, which is our own community of support. We *should* give money. Just wanted to mention that. And yes, we should work actively for social justice. I intend to be at the March for Racial Justice this afternoon, and I hope to see you there as well. Furthermore, you can find verses to support for all three understandings of the Christian life in the Book of Hebrews. It says to be honest and faithful in marriage (personal morality), not to neglect the assembling together (support the church), and to be hospitable to strangers (break down social barriers). But here's the problem with all three of those common definitions: they are all based on externals, and they are all measured externally. How do you know a "good Christian"? Do you keep the rules? Do you attend church? Do you make a difference in society? But Hebrews is not interested in externals. For this author, living the Christian life is about being utterly transformed, inside and out, as we follow the difficult model of Christ himself. Chapter 12, verse 3: *Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.* Um, that sounds as if living the Christian life will be painful. Yep. Verse 7: *Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline?* Yes, but . . . verse 11: *Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*

What Hebrews teaches is that our lives of faith are measured by how we deal with and what we learn from suffering trials. It's not about being pure, or being faithful, or being active in good works; it's about being *changed*. And deep change always comes through pain. Doesn't it? Have you ever in your life experienced a time of deep, significant spiritual growth that didn't start with hardship? I haven't. This week I looked back at the times in my life when I can see that I grew in my faith, and came up with three. One was when my sister died in 1981. One was when I lost my job as a university professor and ended up substitute teaching and doing day labor for a landscaper. And the third was the time, prompted by a family crisis, when I left the Baptist church of my childhood, came here, to this church, and then, almost immediately, began walking with a friend through terminal cancer. These were hard times. Without these time of intense stress, when all that I had once believed was thrown into doubt and all that had once felt solid to me was shaken, I would be a very different person today – and a lesser one. I don't ever want to go through another time like that again – though, of course, I will – but neither do I want to go back to the callow, superficial person I was before I walked through those valleys.

Now I need to pause to make one thing clear. The fact that I have grown most through tragedy in my life does *not* mean that God caused those tragedies in order to teach me some valuable lesson. Hebrews almost seems to say that, though not quite, but I simply don't accept it. I am not so important that God would be willing to kill my younger sister for the sake of helping me to grow in faith. Nor is God such a heartless, manipulative so-and-so as to do that. Here's what we should understand from Hebrews instead. Suffering happens. Sometimes we bring it on ourselves, and sometimes it just happens. We should not seek it out, nor do we need to. It happens to us all. But when it happens, face it squarely, look to God, and prepare to be transformed. At that moment, if you will hear God's voice, then you are opening yourself to being molded into the image of the one who faced every conceivable suffering and prevailed. The Christian life is not about what good deeds we do or bad deeds we don't do; it is about courage in the face of all that the world throws at us. And our progress in faith is not measured by how much good we've accomplished, but rather by how tall we stand when we come out the other side.

This idea of learning through struggle is *not* something you hear much in America today. We are probably the most risk-averse, safety-obsessed nation in history. Maybe it's fear of lawsuits, but you can't do anything without being warned against possible risks. "Do not use this iron to press clothes while wearing them!" No, I didn't make that up. The church's insurance company just required us to buy some new non-slip mats for the dishwasher room – safety first! – so now we're all tripping over the new mats. We have a whole generation of parents –called "Helicopter Parents" – whose notion of raising children appears to be to keep them safe from every danger, every irritation, every challenge, every exertion. But that's not how we learn or grow. Whether we whether we approve of it or not, God did not create a safe world. So don't hide from it. Try new things, think new thoughts, stretch your boundaries, make friends with people who are different, listen to opinions you don't like, put yourself in situations where you are uncomfortable. And then, when the real trials come, and they will, let God shape you. Verses 12 and 13: *Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your wobbly knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.*